Hello. I’m Bob Bradley. This is THE 101, Introduction to Theater and Drama Arts. We are very fortunate today to have as our guest Milton Paul Blankenship, an actor — an actor who has spent a great deal of his career performing in musical theater and has long been associated with the very famous New York Sullivan Street Playhouse Production of “The Fantasticks.” And all of these things we will talk about during this coming hour.

B: But let’s start with — okay. Milton Paul Blankenship, why — what name do you use when?

MPB: Okay. This is sort of a complicated story but in a way it’s not complicated at all. Milton Paul Blankenship is my full name — my first, middle, and last name. I was named after both of my grandfathers, Milton on one side and Paul on the other. And for the first five years of my life, everyone in my family called me Paul. Then when I started going to school, because Milton was my first name, the schoolteacher started calling me Milton. So suddenly everybody was calling me Milton and that was the case all the way up through SMS, through my grad school training. And then when I joined Actors Equity Association, I decided to use Paul as my professional name because I found that in getting up at auditions, having to state my name, I was constantly stumbling over Milton Blankenship. So I thought, you know, Paul is a lot easier to get out, so I started using Paul. And it wasn’t foreign to me because half of my family called me Paul to begin with or Milton Paul, so that’s how it came about.

B: And this is sort of an official registered name?

MPB: Right. Whenever you join Actors Equity, you have to give an official name. Frequently somebody else has your name or the first name that you would want to use, and then
you have to add like an initial or something. Some people even have to change their name. In other words, there couldn’t be another — if there was already a Bob Bradley in Actors Equity, you couldn’t be Bob Bradley. You would have to be Bob H. Bradley or something like that.

B: So no one else can — at least as long as you have it registered, no one else can usurp your name and --

MPB: Exactly. It’s sort of like a copyright, I guess, with the union.

B: Let’s take you from Springfield to the present day. Okay. When you left Springfield, where did you go?

MPB: When I left Springfield I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be a professional actor or not. I didn’t know exactly what route I wanted to take. I thought about maybe educational theater. I thought about music because I had a strong background in music. I was actually a music major my freshman year before I changed my major to theater. And I auditioned for graduate schools because I thought, “Well, I need more training if I’m really going to try to make it professionally.”

So I thought, “If I audition for some grad schools and some school thinks I’m talented enough to offer me a position, then that will be a sign.” So I went to Chicago and auditioned for what they called the League — at the time it was called the League of American Training Schools, I believe. It was kind of an elite group that included Juilliard, Yale, NYU, Temple, University of Washington, and SMU happened to be one of the schools — Southern Methodist University in Dallas.
And lo and behold, they offered me a slot in their grad program. It was very selective.

I think they only accepted like 12 students into the program. At the time— I don’t know what it is now, but at the time it was a two-year program and you did — at the end of this two-year program, you received your MFA in acting.

And it was just what I needed because for the first time in my life I was able to totally concentrate on theater, on acting. We studied movement, voice, acting, of course, stage combat. That was sort of like the first year. And then you moved into other things like period styles, comedia, improvisation, that sort of thing, your second year.

At the end of the second year you went to New York and you did what they called the League presentations. And you had -- each school in the League had like an hour to present their graduating class. It was very nerve-wracking because you were up in front of all of these regional theater representatives, casting directors in New York, agents in New York, and, yeah, all of a sudden you were forced into the big time. It was sort of like trying out for the major leagues, you know. They would express their interest in you if they so desired and — or if they didn’t desire, you sort of went home and you thought, “Well, maybe I should rethink this, you know.” But, of course, as actors, as George Cohen says, “I bounce.” Most actors are very resilient and in being turned down, of course, we hear that all the time.

But luckily for me the Alley Theater in Houston was interested in me and they offered me the glorious position of apprentice. So I thought, “Wow, a regional theater thinks I’m talented enough to be a part of their company.” So I went to the Alley as an apprentice and made $75 a week the first year. And we understudied the major roles
in all the shows — the apprentices did. We did a children’s theater production of our own. Then we also did all kinds of other stuff like laundry and dry cleaning and set painting. I mean, you learned the theater. You learned every aspect of the theater. It was really a good thing for me at the time.

Then at the end of that first year they invited me back a second year to be an apprentice and this time they raised my salary to $100 a week. But then in the second year they started offering me actual roles in the shows. I started doing some really nice acting parts. I played Paris in “Romeo and Juliet” that year and I was in their production of “Strider.” I was in their production of “Cheerio,” a small part.

And what happened was they wanted me to come back the third year as an actor and they again — the roles got bigger and I think I was cast in almost every show. But by that time I’d performed enough on an equity stage that they had to give me my equity card and that’s how I got my equity card. And I then spent a full season at the Alley as a company member, as a full-fledged equity company member.

And I felt kind of lucky about that because when I went to New York, which was shortly after that, about 9 months or so, I had my equity card already. And that’s one thing that’s very difficult for a lot of performers to get when they first go to New York because, I mean, how do you get your card? You can’t audition for equity shows without one and you can’t get one without being in an equity show. So it’s sort of like, you know, the old “Catch-22” thing.

So luckily I had my card when I went to New York and I started auditioning and got pretty lucky. Started getting cast within — I think I got cast my first couple of weeks in
New York in an equity children's theater show which toured.

B: When you say “touring,” national tour, local tour or --

MPB: It was a national tour but there was nothing glamorous about it. We toured in a van, all across the country, doing a rock ‘n roll version of “Androcles and the Lion,” and I played the lion. And we would do two or three shows a day. We would pull into towns, go into a motel, and we would do a show at 9:00 o’clock in the morning, a show at 1:00 o’clock in the afternoon, and maybe another one at 4:00 o’clock in the afternoon. And not only were we performing in these shows, but we were all contracted under what they called an ASM contract which means you’re an assistant stage manager. So you got a little bit of money extra but what that also meant was that you had to put up the set and take the set down.

We were like a tour of traveling players. It was great experience. We would pull into a town, we would put the set up, do a show, put it away, travel to another school, same thing. About three times a day, I guess. And we did that all over the United States.

B: Nothing glamorous about that.

MPB: Nothing glamorous about that.

B: You have remained almost totally — as far as I know, almost totally live theater. Was that a choice or is it just a happenstance or --

MPB: It’s just something that has happened. It’s just something that has happened. I am more than willing to do film parts and TV parts. They just haven’t come my way. I think one of the reasons is in New York you get typed very quickly because there’s so many
actors. Unless you’re a very special few who can cross over, they type you almost immediately, casting directors do and agents, as — okay. He’s a stage actor or he’s a film and TV actor, or he’s a commercial actor. And you just sort of get put into these slots.

And because I had a talent with musical comedy — was a pretty good singer, I tended to get cast a lot in musicals. And once you start building up in a certain category on your resume, it’s very difficult to cross over. They’ll look at your resume and they’ll start seeing the musicals, and they’ll go, “Oh, he does stage.” And almost immediately you’re put into that category.

And I think the same thing sort of holds true for people who do basically film and TV. They look at them and they think, “Oh, well, he’s great for camera, but I’m not so sure that he could really carry a show for three hours in the evening eight times a week,” you know. So they just sort of get put in the categories sort of like, I guess, baseball. “He’s an infielder. He’s an outfielder. He’s a relief pitcher,” you know. It’s how they sort of have to organize it. Unless you happen to pop that bubble and become a star. Then they like to use you for anything because of the name, you know.

B: Your resume is mostly musical theater. Again, is that a choice or it’s where you’ve been cast so —

MPB: I would say as far as live theater goes, I’ve been pretty lucky. It’s been — it’s almost 50/50. I’ve been cast in a lot of Shakespeare. I’ve done a lot of regional theater, Shakespeare festivals. I did the Dallas Shakespeare Festival. I played Cassio opposite Morgan Freeman as Othello. And I did the Houston Shakespeare Festival
for like two years. Last — I guess it was a year and a half ago I was very lucky. I was able to do the American premiere of Moliere’s “The Bungler,” first time it’s ever been performed in the United States. It was adapted by Richard Wilbur who does a lot of his translations, adaptations. And we did that at the Longworth Theater in New Haven.

And I was in “Wonderful Tennessee” about three years ago, a Brian Field play at the McCarter Theater.

So regionally I’ve been able to keep the classical thing going. In New York, because of “The Fantasticks,” which I had been doing off and on for 16 years. It’s the world’s longest running musical. It seems that in New York mainly what I’m known for is a musical comedy performer.

B: And so what kinds of roles have you done in musicals?

MPB: In “The Fantasticks” in New York, I started as the Mute there. Then I went away and did “Camelot” on the road with Richard Harris, the last two tours that he did, and I started out in the ensemble and ended up understudying Mordred and got to go on opposite him which was very exciting. I’ll never forget the — I had a put-in rehearsal with Richard Harris one afternoon and it was like heaven working with this man.

B: You probably need to explain put-in rehearsal.

MPB: A put-in rehearsal is when an understudy steps into a role and luckily they don’t just throw you out there with no rehearsal at all. What usually happens, if you’re in a touring show like we were with “Camelot,” which was a national tour and played the major cities in America, if I was understudying a role like Mordred, we would have rehearsals on a weekly basis, understudy rehearsals, but you would not rehearse with
the actual person you’re going on with. Like I would not rehearse with Richard Harris. I would rehearse with the actor who’s understudying Richard Harris. We would do that once a week so I would know my blocking, my movement, my lines, my song. But if you were going to go on on a specific evening — for instance, the first evening I was to go on as Mordred, I would have what they call a put-in rehearsal that afternoon. The cast would be assembled and we would — I would be able to go through my show. We wouldn’t go through the whole show, just my role in the show, the scenes that I’m in, with the real people so that I would get a chance to relate to them.

B: Now, you just did this the one time — the first time you ever did it and after that --

MPB: After that I think maybe I went on a couple of times, but I still was the understudy. I never officially took over the role. But the afternoon that I was doing the put-in rehearsal, before the rest of the cast came it was just Richard Harris and myself. For me, that’s one of the highlights of my career was getting to work with him and relating to him on a personal level. Because he knows everything technically. I mean, he was talking about singing the line, you know, and he was giving me compliments which I was very happy about. And I think it was because of my musical theater background, but he was — you know, the British like to play the scales of the voice. They take a very low part to the very high part, and all over the place. And if you listen to Richard Harris act, he does that beautifully. He plays his voice like an instrument. Whereas as American actors, what we tend to do is we get stuck in a very limited vocal range. If you’re talking about a keyboard, we use maybe, you know, six — yeah,
six notes or something. We don’t have that range. And what he was helping me to do was to discover that range and it was like a lightbulb went off and I went, “Hey, yeah. Why limit myself to this? There’s a lot of other notes that can be played.” So that was a wonderful, wonderful learning experience for me.

B: Have you found yourself continuing to use that and develop that in some way?

MPB: Yes. I became interested in voice and speech for the actor and, of course, I studied that at SMU, what they call the Kristen Linkletter technique. And I became more interested in it and in the last couple of years I’ve actually started teaching it at the American Academy for Dramatic Art in New York City. I started as like a substitute teacher and then last summer they offered me a — I taught a summer course. And last fall I actually took one class through a whole semester and I find it very challenging and very rewarding to try to open up these American actors to using their voice as an instrument like any other type of an instrument in an orchestra.

B: Have you been to any of the professional studios in New York to take classes of any kind after your SMU or --

MPB: Studying acting is such a — it’s a tricky, sensitive thing. What I have continued to do on a very regular basis is take voice classes -- voice meaning singing — because of the instrument. It’s like, I think, playing the piano or the cello or anything, or dancing. You really have to work out on a daily basis almost to keep that instrument in shape. Acting is much more spiritual.
And when you learn a certain technique— like I had a teacher in my grad school. His name is Dale Rose and I think he’s head of the acting program up at UMKC now. But we studied a certain technique. It’s almost like you become afraid to mess with it — you know, to go to another teacher — because you don’t want to mess it up in any way. And Dale was in New York for awhile and I continued to take classes with him, and maybe this is a — it could be a fault of my own but I’ve been very hesitant to work with another acting teacher because there’s a certain philosophy that’s inside my brain that I really — I sort of don’t want to mess with.

B: Okay. Can you articulate that philosophy, that process, in some way?

MPB: For me, acting starts on a very personal level, the way I approach a role. I try to approach the role as myself at first and try to find everything that I can that I have in common as Milton with that character. And then start narrowing it down, of course, through the rehearsal process, eliminating certain things about me that doesn’t fit with that character, and then trying to discover some things within me that maybe I’m not aware of that I do have that’s in common with that character. So that the character starts to emerge in that fashion. So that’s sort of happening on a very personal level. Then on a technical level I try to work a lot with objectives and those are in different stages.

B: Objectives meaning --

MPB: What I want. What I want. What the character wants. It starts on a very simple level with each line that that character states. Do I want — when I say this line, what is my intent for this line? Then it emerges into a broader scope of what we call in acting
beats within a scene. A beat might include three lines. It might include half a dozen lines or twelve.

But things change sometimes and then it’s sort of like what do I want for this beat? What is my objective or intent for this beat? And then that sort of — it sort of emerges and becomes a larger area which includes a scene. What do I want with this scene? At the end of this scene, have I achieved what I want or am I still prevented by what we call an obstacle in getting what I want? What’s in the way of me achieving what I want as this character?

Then, of course, that emerges into an act. What do I want with this act? What do I want by the end of this act? What do I want to achieve? When I begin this act, what do I want and by the end of the act have I achieved it or am I still blocked in some way? Then, of course, that then emerges into what do I want with this play, this journey that I’m taking as an actor throughout the course of this play this playwright has written? What does this character want ultimately by the end of these three hours or whatever? What am I trying to get? What am I trying to achieve?

So that’s it sort of in a simple form, in a simple matter. Of course, it can take on many different colors and characterizations, you know, within that. And a character changes throughout the course. By the third act he might not be interested in what he was interested in achieving in the first act. But if you break it down into those very tiny areas, I think it’s sort of like a building block throughout the play. You’ve gotta start — you have to start with that one line. What do I want with this one line? What am I trying to communicate?
And sometimes you even can break it down to the individual word. There’s just a word that that character is all about. For instance, that character might be all about being alone. I just want to be alone, by myself. Or that character might want to be a — I just want to be accepted. That’s what that character’s all about. So sometimes it comes down to a simple little word: like me.

Or, you know, we did “Company” together and I think Bobby in “Company” is all about being alive. It’s sort of what he figures out by the end of it, perhaps. I just want to be alive, feel alive. I don’t want to feel numb. I want to be alive. You take it to that personal level and try to find that objective with each line and then start expanding it with each beat, each scene, each act, the whole shape of the show. That’s sort of my technique in a nutshell.

B: Now, do you work — and your indication would be — do you work differently when you’re looking at a musical from a play, a non-musical play, or what do you do there?

MPB: I really try not to. I really try to approach it, especially on the acting side — I really try to approach it as if you were just doing a straight play. Because the audience has to believe you. You have to be real. But, of course, musicals are heightened reality. Characters sing songs and they do dances which normally they don’t do in real life. I think the audience will become much more involved in the musical if you do try to be as human as you can and make it as real as you can. And then when that person — that character, for instance, breaks into a song, you accept it more readily, you know, as if it’s — he’s become — someone explained it to me. In a musical, it’s sort of like a
character gets to a certain emotional level and he can't really express it anymore verbally. He has to take it to a higher form and that's when he breaks into song or a dance.

B: When you get to a song, you find a reason why that character is doing it at that point?

MPB: Yeah. I approach the songs the same way. I try to personalize them and then find an objective through the song, why this character is singing this song at this specific moment.

B: So at this point you're giving it a dramatic validity, then?

MPB: Yeah. I think it's just like a monologue. I like to look at a song as — the same as a monologue. As a matter of fact, one of the best things that you can do with a song as an actor is to not sing it when you're working on it. Just approach it as dialogue. Just speak it as if it's a speech, as if he's talking and not singing the song, and then let the melody come about, you know.

B: What do you learn from the music? What does the music tell you? Once you've gotten to that point and now you're moving to the study of the music, what do you learn from the music?

MPB: The music is something that the composer has given to you as a gift. Sort of lets you know what the composer and writer had in mind as to the mood of the spoken word at this point. If it's dissident, if it's minor, if it's happy, if it's an up tempo, if it's a ballad — it's a wonderful tool. It helps you as an actor as to know where the shape of this needs
to go intellectually mood-wise.

It would be sort of like if you had a monologue in a film, a speech in a film, and suddenly, you know, there were like violins underneath or percussion underneath of brass playing like a Sousa band. That would aid the listener, the watcher and perhaps even the actor, in knowing what kind of a mood the playwright had in mind for that character at that time or where the character’s at within his own brain.

So if you’re singing a song and it’s a ballad, it has a certain type of emotional message. If it’s an up tempo, it has a totally different emotional message. The same way if it’s in a minor key or if it’s in a major key. Major keys are happy, minor keys are more sad and reflective. Yeah, it’s — I mean, the song itself, the melody line, is a wonderful tool for the singer.

**B:** Do you ever find that you begin at one point and then once you get to the music that you alter what you were originally thinking or adjust in some way or the other?

**MPB:** Definitely. Sometimes I think in the history of musical comedy, like with “Oklahoma,” composers started using music to further the plot along so the character changes within the song. He enters a song at one place. By the time he ends the song, he’s emerged to a different place emotionally. Takes a journey within the song. Yeah. So definitely. As the character and even as the actor, I think, you have the opportunity to make those discoveries in rehearsal. This song has taken me to a different place now than I even expected. It’s starting to surprise me a little bit.

And I think the main thing is that you have to allow yourself to be open to those changes.
It’s very tempting to get the script and to intellectualize it at home, and show up at rehearsal and, “Well, I know what I’m gonna do with this song” or “I know what I’m gonna do with this scene,” you know. I think our job as actors is to be more or less a clean slate and allow the message of the show, the other actors you’re working with, the director of course, to guide you. And if you change throughout the rehearsal process, you change.

B: Now, I know that you have done some work in musical reviews and that is musicals which do not have a plot, which do not have a story connected to them. What do you do with the songs that you’re singing there in reviews of some kind?

MPB: The way I approach it, each song is its own mini production, mini play. An example of a show like that would be “Jacques Brel is Alive and Living in Paris.” Jacques Brel was a songwriter and a group of his friends — Eric Blough and Mort Schuman, L. A. Stone — they said, “Well, I think that we should bring this music to America.” So they put this review together around his music but he’d never really intended — he’d never intended it to be a show of any kind. He’s just a concert performer. So the job as an actor in a show like that is to take each individual song and take the journey with that song so that the song itself becomes — has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And you take the journey throughout the song. Each song is like a one act of its own and tells a story.

B: And so you come out and you present this one act to the audience?
MPB: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Sometimes you’re all by yourself. It’s just a monologue, a one man show for three minutes. Sometimes it’s a duet or a trio or an ensemble number and you’re all presenting this mini show for that four or five minute period or two minutes, however long the song goes on. And frequently the way a review is constructed, the last song sort of ties it all up in a neat little bow and says, “This is what this evening has been about.”

B: All of these stories come together in some way or the other?

MPB: Right. For instance, in “Jacques Brel” they chose to end the song with — end the show with his song, “If We Only Have Love” which sums up the journey that we’ve been on. Because within that show there are a lot of dark places that you journey into and happy places and hurtful places, painful places. But in the end the message perhaps for the entire review was if we only have love we can rise above all of this pain and darkness perhaps.

B: You mentioned early on that you had been — your first year in college as a music major and then you switched and you became a theater major, and then you went to SMU and at that point you were getting in MFA in acting. Okay. Obviously — well, what talents do you need to be performing musical theater?

MPB: Well, in musical theater you really need to be what they call a triple threat. You need to be able to act, obviously, ’cause you need to be able to say lines and carry a scene with dialogue in it. You need to be able to sing because, obviously, there are a lot of
songs and you have to sing songs. And then you also should be a fairly good dancer or at least able to, you know, carry it off. I don’t think of myself as a very good dancer, but I’ve been cast in a lot of dance roles.

And so you have to be able to have — you need to have some training in dance to be able to work with a choreographer. So I would say it’s one of the hardest facets of theater to master because you have to be able to do all of these — these three things really quite well. Because the competition is amazing, especially in New York. You wouldn’t believe how many people are incredible at all three.

B: What did you do to get your dance training or to hone your skills, or whatever?

MPB: I was very lucky with my training at SMS, believe it or not. I learned most of my dance here at SMS. I mean, that was my early training with Cheryl Miller who was on the faculty here. My first professional job was that summer of ’73 when we did “Brigadoon” and “Jacques Brell,” and suddenly I was like dancing in “Brigadoon.” And when I became a theater major here I had to take certain classes and I took — I took modern dance and jazz. I took ballet. I took tap. All here in college.

And I think that the modern classes that I took actually helped me the most as an actor because it was based a lot in Martha Graham. And there was just something about feeling comfortable in your own body, freeing yourself within your own body, that was great. Even to this day I still get down on the floor and when I stretch or warm up I do those same exercises that learned over there at McDonald Arena in modern dance class, to stretch and to warm up and to get connected with my instrument. It’s just like
a saxophone player or a trumpet player. He wouldn’t think about playing a symphony without, you know, warming up first. It’s the same way with actors, at least for me. I have to — I have to warm my instrument up before I can start working with it. But after I left SMS I continued to take dance classes off and on. But not a lot because it’s -- like I say, not my strong point. Unless I get cast in something and need to do something for a specific reason, then suddenly I jump into it full force. Like this summer I’m performing George M in “George M,” and he’s a song and dance man and he does some tap dancing. And I hadn’t tap danced for years and I began to freak out and suddenly jumped into tap classes in New York, which was one of the best things I could’ve ever done because it’s such great therapy. I’d forgotten how good for the soul tap dancing is. I mean, you come out of class and you just feel so light and airy, and you’re able to just let everything go that you’ve been maybe, you know, worrying about all day. And I think I’m — after the summer’s over, I think I’m going to try to keep taking one or two tap classes a week just because I think it’s good for the spirit, for the soul.

B: Maybe at this point we should explain. You said you took tap classes in New York. How do you find these classes and what do you do?

MPB: It’s one of the easiest things to do and one of the least expensive. Voice lessons are incredibly expensive. When I take a voice lesson in New York and it’s cost me, I think, $70 an hour to take one voice class. Acting classes are not as expensive, but you still have to fork out like maybe $500 for eight weeks worth of classes which is hard, you know, for a struggling actor. Someone who’s maybe recently moved to New York or
waiting tables or doing a temp job or something, or even performing off off Broadway or off Broadway.

But to take a dance class, there are like three or four really top-notch studios. One is called Steps. Another one, the one that I took my tap at, is called Broadway Dance Center and it’s right off like Broadway and 57th Street, right up above the Hard Rock Cafe. And they have like—it’s huge. There’s like three or four floors of dance studios. And you go in there, walk up to the desk and they have a schedule of what’s going on. You pay—I think it’s something like $11-$12 to take a class, an hour class. And you can take tap, jazz, modern, ballet, gymnastics. I think they even offer things like yoga now.

And there’s all different levels. For instance, with the tap, I had to start with basic because I had forgotten how to even shuffle and ball change, you know. And within a week or two, I started getting confident and I started taking what they call the beginning level. And I never graduated from the beginning level. I stayed there. Because it immediately starts to become more complicated and difficult. But, of course, after that there’s intermediate and advanced and master classes, things like that. But, yeah. I mean, dance classes are one of the easiest to get involved with in New York.

B: How do you, then, as an actor, musical theater performer — what do you do to stay in shape? You take classes but --

MPB: Right. I also belong to a health club. I’m a very firm believer in keeping the body toned as an actor because it is your instrument. And I’ve—when I was at SMS, I was a grad assistant in Movement and ended up—at SMU, yeah—a grad assistant in
Movement and ended up teaching Movement to the undergrads. And I had a wonderful movement teacher there — name was Jim Hancock — and I would glean everything I could from him and then I’d teach it to the undergrads.

And so I’ve learned a system of stretching which I do daily. And in addition to that — I do that daily on my own, yeah. Things which I have gleaned from what they call Movement, Theater Movement, to keep flexible and limber. And in addition to that, I also go to a gym — I try to go, you know, three times a week but sometimes I don't make it. And I try to do something cardiovascularly at least for a half hour and then lift some weights and stuff like that just to stay in shape. Because as an actor, you’re always being called on to do physical parts, physical roles, be it stage combat or — I mean, I’ve had to do some amazing things in a limited time period.

Four years ago I was cast in a show up at Goodspeed called “Marette” by the same authors who wrote “The Fantasticks,” Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt. And it was about a bunch of circus performers. And all of a sudden I was cast in the role of an acrobat.

B: Was this a musical or a play?

MPB: Yes, a musical. I was cast in the role of an acrobat. Not only was I cast in the role of the acrobat, I was also called upon to understudy the lead in the production who had to walk a tightrope. So in that four-week rehearsal period, I had to learn to do acrobatic tricks and walk a tightrope on stage. They only put it like three feet high, but still, you know, you’re off the ground. I mean, you can’t fall off and I had to walk that tightwire and talk and sing at the same time while I was up on the wire. If I had not been in halfway
decent, you know, physical shape, I would’ve never made it. They would’ve fired me or probably never have hired me, you know. I wouldn’t have been able to pass the audition process. For that reason, I try to keep myself in as good a shape as I can, you know.

B: That’s physical. Okay. You mentioned taking voice classes or voice lessons. What do you do there?

MPB: There’s two different areas of study vocally. I have a voice teacher and then my vocal session with him — all we do — for 45 minutes of the hour, we only work on the technical aspect of creating tone in the voice. We vocalize for like 45 minutes in that lesson.

B: And how many times a week do you do this or how frequently? This is once a week? And this is once a week all year round?

MPB: Unless I’m out of town.

B: Year after year?

MPB: Yeah. Now, luckily these lessons are tax deductible, you see. That’s the good thing about being a professional actor. All of these business expenses you can deduct. But it does become incredibly expensive.

B: But you still feel this is very necessary for you to stay in shape?

MPB: For me it is, yeah. Then when I go out of town, like when I’m here, I still have my tape of my voice lessons and I do those vocal exercises in my room, you know. It’s not the same because you don’t have your guide, your teacher, there saying, “What are you
doing without placement? That's not quite right. That should be — have more of this shape to it," and so forth. It's sort of like having a personal trainer as a singer. And we vocalize for 45 minutes, just doing scales and tones. And then for the last 15 minutes we will work on a song. But that's really not the emphasis of the lesson. The emphasis of the lesson is all about the technique.

Aside from that, there are what they call vocal coaches. Now, a vocal coach is somebody who doesn't charge as much money, maybe like $55 as opposed to $70 an hour. And you usually don't go to the vocal coach as often. You usually go to a vocal coach when you have an audition coming up and you want to get a certain song in shape for that audition. Or when you're learning a new song to put into your book. Your book is a book that all musical comedy performers have that has all of their songs in it that they can perform at an audition.

And when you want to tone up your book, hone up your book, then you go to a vocal coach. With a vocal coach, you don't work on any of the technique. You don't work on the scales. You just work on singing that song and presenting that song in an audition situation. So he — the vocal coach is usually a much better piano player but he’s not really a singing teacher. He’s helping you communicate that song: sing the song, tell the story within that song. So those are the two differences.

And I don't go to a vocal coach nearly as often, like I say, unless I have an audition coming up. Sometimes you'll go to an audition, for instance, and they will give you a song from the show to come back and sing at what they call the call-back. Then that's when you run to your vocal coach and say, “Okay. I've got this song from the show.”
And it might be a show that’s never been done before so nobody has ever heard this song.

**B:** And you may not even have a context for it but you’ve got a song.

**MPB:** Sometimes you don’t know what the story of the show is. You’ve been given a scene to read maybe, but you don’t know the rest of the story. You’ve been given the song, but you don’t really know how it fits in. So that’s when you run to your vocal coach and say, “Hey, I’ve gotta learn this song. I’ve gotta perform it in two days for the casting people, you know.” Then you just get to work and you might meet with him a couple of times to get the song in shape and learn it.

**B:** So at that point — again, you will create the context if there’s no context there. Because perhaps that’s exactly all they’re really wanting to know, is what kind of context can you give. Whether it’s the one that they’re really looking at or not. And what can you do with it to make it.

**MPB:** And the important thing to do in that situation as an actor is to take a risk and to go there. It might be the wrong choice. It might not be the choice that eventually they’re going to choose for the production or for the show. But you have to make a choice and you have to go there. Otherwise it’s neutral and it doesn’t say anything. It’s muddy. They want to see you make a choice and commit yourself and go somewhere with the journey of the song. They don’t want you to just stand there and sing it in a pretty nice way. They want you to commit to it and take a journey within the song.

**B:** You said take a risk. Why is this a risk?
MPB: It’s a risk because you’re putting yourself out on a limb. You’re not in a safe place. You might — you might feel as if you might fall or you might fail. You’ve made the wrong choice, what they don’t want to hear. You’ve become vulnerable in a situation like that. But it’s something that they want to see as opposed to you just sitting back and doing it in a very boring, neutral way.

And the same thing also applies to a scene that you’re reading or a monologue or something. They want to see you make a choice and go there as opposed to not making a choice and just being placid with it.

B: Whether you’re in a show or not in a show, at this point you find that in order — well, the best phrase is stay in shape. So there’s the physical.

There’s also the vocal. And the dance comes if necessary?

MPB: Right: For me. And the thing that helps you stay in shape as an actor — for me, anyway — like I said, I don’t really go to a lot of acting classes because I’ve got this one technique that I really feel kind of strong about and I sort of don’t want to mess it up. But what is important within that technique for me is staying in touch with who I am. That can mean keeping a journal, paying attention to your dreams, writing them down if you can if you can remember them. Trying to stay — going to therapy, group counseling, whatever keeps you in touch with who you are because that’s what you bring to an acting role. For me, that’s the little — those are the nuggets for the acting. The other things — the voice lessons are for the voice, the dance lessons are — you know, for the body. But for the acting, knowing who you are so that you can personalize that material that’s given to you and make it — bring it from within you so
that it’s real and the audience will believe it. That’s very important.

B: The therapy, whether it be individual or in groups, is there to, what, keep you psychologically attuned?

MPB: Right. To be in touch with who you are, your inner self. And that also — I mean, another level is just observing life. Not being shut off from life but looking at behavior all around you. Trying to see as many productions as you can, other productions. Read as much as you can. I read the newspaper every day because I frequently find stuff that’s happening that is relevant to something I’m performing or something I’m working on. Going to see movies. Just being a sponge basically is what I’m talking about. And as an actor, that’s what you have to do. Because that’s where you — your material to bring to life. Observing, watching life around you, so that you can make it happen — you know, bring it to life on stage.

B: And then you draw on all of this? In what way or how? Do you go back and read your journal at some point if you --

MPB: I do. I’m a packrat. Terrible. I keep stuff that my kids and people who are close to me in my life make fun of me for — you know, saying “What do you hold on to that for?” But I like to, sometimes late at night, you know, get an old box out of the closet and open it up and start going through stuff. And reading cards that somebody perhaps mailed to me, you know, 10 or 12 years ago. That’s where I was then. Was I really that person?

B: And somehow that tunes you up?

MPB: It’s a wonderful, rich, deep, dark soil that you can draw from as an actor to then apply
to a character if need be.

B: For 16 years, off and on, not continuously, you were associated with “The Fantasticks.” “The Fantasticks” was the world’s longest running musical closing after 42 years of continuous playing at the Sullivan Street Playhouse down in the Village in New York. You first went in, you said, as the Mute. And how many different roles did you play in that?

MPB: Going back to the very beginning — it’s a very long story. I hope we have time. But “The Fantasticks” is really the show that brought me into theater. When I was in high school, I didn’t know anything about musical theater. Really, I hadn’t seen a live production until I think I was like --

B: Your high school was where?

MPB: Moberly, Missouri. My father was an Assemblies of God minister and back then it was much more conservative than it is now. And I did not go to movies or live theatrical performances of any kind when I was growing up. And I didn’t see a movie — my first movie was “Tora, Tora, Tora” when I was like a sophomore in high school. And I told my Mom about it, that I had gone to see it, and she said, “Well, don’t tell your father. It might hurt him,” you know.

So I remember seeing the show — I think it was Shaw’s “Arms in the Man” that UMKC had toured through Moberly or something. That was my first live production to ever see and I was like, “Wow, that’s really something.” And then around the same time I wasn’t involved in the high school choir yet but I’d always been singing in church.
But I went to hear a production, like a concert production at my high school, and they did a medley of songs from “The Fantasticks.” And I went to the music teacher at the time and said, “What is that?” She told me and I remember thinking to myself, “Well, whatever that is, that’s what I want to do for the rest of my life.” And I remember thinking — having that thought. And then I went to see the show on a school trip in like 1972. Then when I first got to New York as a --

B: You saw it in New York?

MPB: In New York. At Sullivan Street, yeah. And then when I first went to New York, I dropped my picture and resume off at the box office ‘cause I wanted to audition for that show so desperately, and I had — I think I had three auditions before I was ever hired for that show. And then when I finally did get hired they hired me as the Mute. And I was ecstatic, you know. I’m in the show. I’m in a New York production. And it was great because the Mute had to understudy the boy and El Gallo so I was learning these other roles. But I only stayed with the show like 9 months and then I got the job with “Camelot” so I left the show.

And when that tour with “Camelot” was over, I came back to New York and the role of the boy opened up and they offered that to me. So then I went in as the boy for like another year. And then I left the show to do a couple of shows with Tom O’Horgan who directed “Hair” and “Lennie on Broadway Superstar.” During that time they decided to put together a Japanese tour and the Japanese producers had seen me to the boy, so they wanted to know if I was available and I was and I was hired to do that.

We played all over Japan, from the south to the north. And we didn’t just play — we
played the major cities like Tokyo and Nagoya, Osaka, but then we went into these small little villages and it was wonderful and brought “The Fantasticks” to them. And they loved the show. And we were trying to figure out, “Why do they love the show so much?” And then someone explained to us that they used “The Fantasticks” in their grammar school to teach English, that they studied that play. So they’re familiar with the story and they listen to the music and they know the show. And it also incorporates a lot of Asian theatrical devices — “The Fantasticks” does — the use of the Mute, for instance. If you go to see Kabuki there are like four or five different mutes all over the stage. And so that was a great experience.

And then I came back and did a second Japanese tour. By that time I was starting to get a little too old to be the boy anymore, so I went back and played the Mute for that production. And then they did a national tour — “The Fantasticks” — with Robert Goulet as El Gallo. And I was cast in that in the ensemble, believe it or not. We were playing these huge theaters which national tours played, theaters that seat like 2,000 people sometimes. They decided, “Well, because it’s a huge theater, we have to expand the cast.”

And suddenly they had like eight mutes and we were all oohing and ahhing and it just didn’t work. Because “The Fantasticks” is a very intimate show. It needs to be done — we used to call it living room drama. Because it’s played in a — it was played in a theater in New York that only sat 149 people and some of them are no further away from you than you from me right now. And that’s how it works best.

So when they tried to expand it, it just — we only did half of the tour and it wasn’t
selling, and they canceled it. But there was a period of time when the stage manager was out of town. And because — when I had been the Mute originally, I was also the ASM — assistant stage manager. They usually cast somebody within the show to be the assistant stage manager. Because I had done that, he asked me to fill in for him when he was away.

So he was away doing something else. I was stage managing the show and we lost our El Gallo. He quit. So suddenly I was the man in charge and I had to cast a new El Gallo and put him into the show. And that’s how I originally learned the part of El Gallo although I had understudied it as the Mute.

Then a few years after that, whenever El Gallo would be on vacation or would be sick, they would call me in to perform the role. And then finally three or four years ago they asked me to start doing it on a permanent basis, which I did. And they would allow me to take leave of absences to go out of town and do other jobs, and things like that. But they would always hold the spot for me. And I did that up until three weeks before, you know, it closed and I had another job offer which would continue me working for another three months and I took that. So that's my life with “The Fantasticks” in a nutshell.

**B:** One of the memorable performances that I’ve heard you talk about is the performance that you gave, what, two days after September 11?

**MPB:** Right. That was a wild experience. It caught all of by surprise. “The Fantasticks,” for one thing, had never shut down except on one other occasion and that was when President Kennedy was shot, assassinated. That was the only other time that they
had to cancel a show. And September 11th happened and, of course, they canceled the show and we stayed dark for — I think that happened on a Tuesday maybe. We stayed dark Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday and we reopened on Friday. And none of us really thought about it. We — you know, “The Fantasticks” was in Greenwich Village which was only about — I don’t know — 20 blocks or so from Ground Zero. And you could smell it in the air. I mean, it was still very potent in the air and everything. And we had a small house that night. We only had maybe — we didn’t even know if anyone would show up because I don’t think traffic was — I don’t think the subways were running below 14th Street yet and “Fantasticks” was down around what would be — it was been Houston and West Fort Street. So it was down there. We had like maybe 12 people in the audience. And the first thing that El Gallo says or has to sing — come out on stage and the music starts — the first thing he says — tries to say, which is what happened to me, is “Try to remember the kind of September when life was slow and oh so mellow. Try to remember the kind of September when you were a tender and callow fellow. Try to remember the kind of September when life was an ember about to billow. Try to remember and if you remember then follow.”

Well, I could not sing those lyrics. I just had to speak them. And then I would turn and it was somebody else’s turn to go “Follow, follow, follow” on stage. And I’d look up there and the girl was crying, and I’d look over at the boy and he was crying. Looked out on the cast — I mean, out in the audience and the whole audience was, you know,
sobbing. So it was a very, very, highly emotional evening in the theater. And at the end of the performance we all, you know, stood and made a circle with the audience, and said a little word of, you know, hope for the victims. Because of course at that time they were right in the middle of the recovery effort, so we all had very high hopes that hundreds of people were going to be found.

[TAPE SIDE 1 ENDS HERE]